I Believe

June 19, 2024

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.”

This is the opening of the Apostles’ Creed, often said to be the most well-composed confession of faith in Christian history. Many Christians repeat “I believe, I believe” at each worship service. But do they truly understand the meaning of these words? Today, let us reflect on what it means to believe.

I. What Do We Believe? Whom Do We Believe?

A baby sleeping peacefully at its mother’s breast trusts the mother completely. It is perfect trust. The baby is not believing in something but trusting in someone—the mother. It is not because the baby has studied and learned about the mother, nor because the baby has gained knowledge and then decided to rely on it. Without knowing anything, instinctively, the baby trusts the mother and is utterly at ease.

Our Christian faith is the same. It is not a matter of learning something, understanding it, and then believing that understanding. We human beings are given an instinct to sense and trust Someone invisible. Though distorted and weakened by sin, this instinct still remains in us. Even without clarity, we have always trusted Someone, relied on Someone, in a vague way. When God created us in His image—with mind, heart, emotion, understanding, grace, and love—He shared with us the capacity to trust.

At its core, our trust is the same as a nursing infant’s trust in its mother. It is to entrust everything, to yield all, and to live without worry. Now, through Scripture, we know that the One we trust is the Creator of heaven and earth. We are taught that He made humankind in His own image. With this greater knowledge, our trust is made stronger and more informed. Not only do we instinctively sense the Creator and trust Him, but by the teaching of Scripture, we come to understand more deeply and trust more firmly.

Still, our trust is not in knowledge itself. The teaching of Scripture and the theology built upon it are precious, but our God-given spiritual instinct comes first. Like the infant trusting its mother without knowing, we trust the Creator and build up trust through experience. Knowledge helps make that trust solid and accurate, guarding it from errors born of ignorance.

Thus, we must not despise knowledge. Knowledge has its value and its place. Without knowledge, trust can often fall into grave mistakes.

II. Believing or Trusting?

When we study Scripture, theology, or hear sermons, the word "faith" is often used. This comes from the way the Bible was translated. The Japanese word *shinkō* (faith) carries a sense of reverence, of looking up to One who is exalted. It is a fine word, but it also carries the nuance of intellectual assent—accepting doctrines or teachings as true. It can also drift into the vague, conceptual religiosity common in Japan: an abstract attitude of respect toward an ill-defined being. It can feel like a stance suitable for adults, but remote from the trust of a small child.

If instead of "faith" we translate it as "trust," the meaning often becomes clearer. "Trust" can be used even for a nursing infant. To believe in God is first of all to trust Him. Even if we do not clearly understand who God is, by our instinctive capacity and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can trust the Creator God in the same way a baby trusts its mother.

We have often overused the word "faith" in ways that obscure the essential meaning of trust. As a result, many people in Japan end up with a vague religiosity, admiring some undefined being, but not grasping the biblical sense of trust. Many educated Japanese conclude that they cannot really understand faith, and so they give up. That is because they have not been taught that faith is essentially trust—the same kind of trust as that of a small child.

III. Believing in Christ or Believing in the Creator?

Do we believe in Christ, or in God? For the Jews who had received the Old Testament and were waiting for the promised Messiah, believing in the Creator God was a given, the foundation. Thus, the emphasis fell on believing in Christ. The New Testament, too, is essentially the continuation and fulfillment of the Old Testament: the astounding news that the promised Messiah had come. Believing this news became the emphasis. This, in turn, became the faith of Western Christianity.

But we Japanese did not receive the Old Testament. We did not hear God's promise of a coming Savior. We do not even know much about the Creator God. For us, to leap directly to "believing in Christ" is too great a jump. We must begin with trusting the Creator of heaven and earth.

The apostle Paul, when explaining that salvation by faith is given not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles, began by speaking of "faith in Christ." Yet without hesitation, and without explanation, he also spoke of "the faith of Abraham who believed God." For Paul, faith in Christ and faith in God were essentially the same.

Abraham lived two thousand years before Christ. He knew nothing of Christ. Yet Abraham, too, was saved by faith in God, because of Christ's redeeming work. In the same way, those who do not know Christ but trust the Creator God will be saved—because of Christ's redemption.

So when we explain the gospel to Japanese people, before we explain Christ, we should encourage them to trust the God who created heaven and earth. For Japanese, too, as human beings made in God's image, the instinct to trust the Creator has been present from the beginning.